

Africa: Getting history wrong

by GWYNNE DYER

'I think that there's a strategy to divide and conquer and to create a very contrived confusion,' said Samuel Okuzeto Ablakwan, Ghana's foreign minister. 'We denounce and totally reject those claims that Africans are as guilty and complicit as those who masterminded this whole atrocity.' He's wrong, of course, but it's still a common delusion.

Ablakwan has been given special responsibility by the African Union to be 'champion for reparatory justice' for three centuries of the transatlantic slave trade, and claims that 'Ghana was the crime scene'. (An estimated 15 per cent of the African slaves sent west came from Ghana.)

Some of the 'reparations' demanded are easy to make. An apology is always welcome, even if it's only for the deeds of your ancestors. It's not really your fault, and apologies are free.

Beyond that it gets more complicated, but there's no harm in sending help to developing African countries for schools or health. If Africans want to sweeten the pot a bit by bringing up the colonial misdeeds of European countries, that's fine too. But the slavery thing is more complicated.

I met real ex-slaves for the first and only time when I was a very young man doing research for a PhD in the 'Sublime Porte' (the Ottoman imperial archives) in Istanbul. Another student mentioned that there was a group of ex-palace slaves 'former 'Black A'as' who gathered at a café just down the hill in Sirkeci. Buy them lunch, and they'll talk to you.

And there they were: four or five very old black men seated around a table, holding court in a Turkish I had never heard before: the old Ottoman Turkish, which freely mixed Arabic and Persian words and grammar with the Turkish core. I was reading that kind of Turkish every day in the archives, but I had never heard it spoken fluently before.

Slavery was officially abolished in the Ottoman empire in 1857, but within the privacy of the Sultan's palaces the old customs prevailed right down to 1909 (the Young Turk revolution). That included the custom of having black Africans, castrated in their childhood or early teens, as harem guards (although the harems were already empty).

When they were turned out onto the street they had nowhere to go. They couldn't go home, if they even knew where that was, so they stayed close to the Palace and between odd jobs they lived on alms from strangers. (Turks are quite generous that way.) Sixty years later there they still were: Africans who spoke only a very old-fashioned Turkish.

I went back several times because it was good for my Turkish, but also because it was a window into the past. They felt great bitterness about what had happened to them, and although in most cases they could not say where they had been born, couldn't even remember their native language, they knew that they had been betrayed and enslaved by their own people.

I never wrote about this before because it seemed beyond the scope of this column, but now it feels relevant. What happened to those old men, now long gone, is not only a story of the cruelty and greed of foreign slave-traders. It is also a story of African cruelty and greed: every African who left the continent as a slave was enslaved in Africa, by Africans.

What, you thought the Europeans went inland and captured slaves themselves? They weren't even allowed to go inland. The fortified 'barracoons' where the slaves were held captive until European slave-trading ships showed up to buy them were owned by local kings or merchants. They saw it as a business, not a horror.

The slaves came from every part of Africa except the far south. Many were sold west across the Atlantic: '10-12 million over 300 years (circa 1550-1850).

More were sold north to the Muslim countries, across the Sahara or up the Indian Ocean coast ? up to 17 million over 1,200 years, beginning soon after the rise of Islam and lasting into the early 20th century.

And of course, tens of millions of Africans live and died as slaves over the centuries without ever leaving Africa.

Ablakwan is wrong both factually and morally. He ignores all the Africans who weren't sold to 'Western' countries, because only Europeans and Americans might be shamed into paying up. There are much wiser people in Ghana.

King Tackie Teiko Tsuru II, leader of Ghana's Ga people, recently said: 'I think that the transatlantic slave trade was the greatest crime against humanity, and (my) ancestors also took part as players in that trade...To be able to go forward, you have to look at your past. It dawns on us to admit our fault and correct it.'

That's a start.